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ABSTRACT

Some of the basic sight word lists which are being used or which might be extensively implemented in the future are described in this paper. The basic criterion used to define a good sight word list is that it contains words which appear with high frequency in children's materials at the beginning reading levels as well as at higher levels. In addition to descriptions of the lists, information on how each was derived is given. The kinds of research that have been conducted on such lists, especially on learnability or difficulty, and some of the implications of this research for classroom teachers are also presented. (TO)

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SIGHT VOCABULARIES

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Sight Vocabularies - What Are They?

The term sight vocabulary probably rings a bell in the deep recesses of the mind of everyone connected with the teaching of reading. For some the term is analogous to hell and damnation, while for others the analogy might be to heaven, purgatory, or even limbo. The term itself is quite innocuous, it's how sight vocabularies are used that causes many questions to arise. But it is not the intent of this paper to pinpoint the uses and abuses that have characterized sight word lists in the past, rather, the focus is on what is a sight vocabulary? What are some sight vocabularies and how were they derived? What kinds of research have been conducted with basic word lists, with an emphasis on learnability or difficulty? And what are some of the implications for classroom teachers?

An obvious question is what is a sight vocabulary? The term defines itself to a certain extent: A sight vocabulary is a vocabulary known on sight.

Everyone at the primary levels of our schools is concerned with the beginning reader. All of our efforts in the reading arena are aimed towards enabling this neophyte to become a proficient reader. At the beginning level the term, sight vocabulary, takes on a bit more of a specialized meaning than at later levels. Here it usually means a core reading vocabulary which is needed to obtain meaning from the printed pages of our preprimers, primers, supplementary materials, and so on.

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Otto and Chester described the rationale for teaching sight vocabulary. They wrote: "The most convincing rationale for teaching sight words is that if they are well selected they will, because of their high frequency in printed materials, have high utility at all levels of reading development. Furthermore, they help to make possible a focus on meaning as well as decoding in early reading, and at the same time they can serve as a basis for analytic phonics instruction (p. 435)." (20)

Sight Vocabulary Lists

A brief glimpse into the literature concerning various aspects of vocabulary lists reveals many types of word lists. The concern here is with sight vocabularies and not with word lists in general. The basic criteria for a good sight word list seems to be that it contains words which appear with high frequency in children's materials at the beginning reading levels as well as at higher levels. Perhaps it is best to describe some of the basic lists which are being used or which might be extensively implemented in the future.

Dolch List

Probably the most widely known sight word list is the Dolch list of 220 basic sight words first published in 1936. (5) Dale Johnson cited its wide usage when he wrote: ". . . perhaps hundreds of thousands of American children have been asked to read and learn these 220 English words (p. 449)." (14) Dolch compiled his list from three main sources: (1) The Wheeler-Howell First Grade Vocabulary list which contains 453 words from primers and first grade readers published in the 1920's. (23); (2) The Gates Primary Word List which includes 1811 words thought be be

important in children's reading, (7) and (3) The International Kindergarten Union Vocabulary List which contains 2596 words found to be most frequently used in the vocabularies of children before they entered first grade. (12) Dolch selected 193 words which were common to all three lists and then added 27 more words which only appeared on one or two of the lists but, in his judgment, seemed to belong in a basic vocabulary list. Dolch's list doesn't include any nouns since he believed nouns can't be of universal use because they are tied to special subject matter and if the subject matter changed so also would the vocabulary involved.

Johnson List

Johnson compiled a list titled "A Basic Vocabulary for Beginning Reading" which he published in 1971. (13) His list contains 306 words which appeared in the first 500 most frequent words of a list compiled by Kucera and Francis (17) in 1967 and which were also used at least 50 times by the kindergarten or first grade children who participated in a study by Murphy and others (19) in which the words in the spontaneous speaking vocabulary of these children were compiled.

A & P List

In 1972 Otto and Chester compiled a 500 word list and titled it "The Great Atlantic and Pacific Sight Word List" (20) since they thought such a title befitted its merits and national origins. (It is this writer's considered opinion that they also hoped to push their list over the counters of your local A & P store and become known as a WEO item--which letters seem quite close to the initials of one of the authors of this A & P List).

The source for the A & P List was the American Heritage Intermediate Corpus developed by John B. Carrol and Associates. (1) The A & P List includes words "drawn from 215 published materials representative of third grade materials in 20 different areas ranging from 'reading' to 'social studies,' 'magazines,' and 'religion'" (p. 436). (20)

The Harris-Jacobson Core List

In 1973 Albert J. Harris and Milton D. Jacobson published their basic word list. (10) They termed it the Harris-Jacobson Core List. This list resulted from their studies of the vocabularies of various texts from grades one through six which they published in their book, Basic Elementary Reading Vocabularies. (9) The Harris-Jacobson Core List is based on the total vocabularies of the complete books of six basal reading series and is arranged in difficulty from preprimer to sixth grade.

Durr List

In October, 1973, William Durr published a 188 word list based upon high frequency words which appeared in 80 library books most frequently chosen by primary grade children. (6) His data showed that, on the average, a reader would meet one of the first ten words on his list in nearly every four words he read in the 80 library books studied. Furthermore, he stated that "The young reader who had instant recognition of just these 188 words would be equipped, on the average, to react instantly to nearly seven out of every ten words in the library books he is most likely to select for free reading" (p. 40). (6)

Word List Research

Innumerable vocabulary studies have been conducted as evidenced by the over 3000 entries in the Bibliography of Vocabulary Studies published in 1963. (4) Many of the studies involve comparisons of lists. Each author attempts to convince his reading audience that his list is better suited as a basic sight word list than those of his colleagues. An interesting example of such a study was published in December in the volume IX/Number 1 issue of the Reading Research Quarterly. It is titled "Some Comparisons between the Basic Elementary Reading Vocabularies and Other Word Lists" and was authored by Albert J. Harris and Milton D. Jacobson. (11)

Most lists have been constructed on some basis of frequency. For example, Durr's List (6) was constructed on the basis of the frequency of words in children's library books, while the Harris-Jacobson List (10) was concerned with the frequency of words in basal readers. The question that remains once a list has been derived is: What words do we teach first? Some people probably think that the most frequent word should be taught first since it probably is the easiest as well as having the greatest utility. However, studies by Wiley (24), Wheeler (22), Coleman (3), Jones (16), and Gustafson (8), have shown that the learnability or difficulty of a word has little or nothing to do with the frequency rating of the word. At this point in time it can't even be said that starting with the easiest would be the best procedure. It might be that we should teach the most difficult words first. The field of psychology will probably shed light on this subject in the future.

Some lists have been broken down into levels on the basis of some measure of difficulty. For example, the Dolch, Johnson, and Harris-Jacobson lists have been set up on graded formats which run from pre-primer or first grade levels and up. Harris and Jacobson (9) used the levels of the basals they studied to rank their words while Johnson (10) studied which words first and second graders knew by sight and ranked his words accordingly. How the Dolch List was broken down into levels is not known by this writer. Rumor has it that possibly Dr. Ted Harris accomplished the feat while he was at the University of Wisconsin about ten years ago, but there doesn't seem to be any published evidence to establish this as fact.

A rather different approach for determining the difficulty of words has been developed by Coleman at the University of Texas at El Paso. (3) He has set up procedures for scaling words in terms of learnability which refers to the ease or difficulty with which a subject learns to give a correct response to the graphic symbols representing a word. In Coleman's procedure a subject is taught words in a look-say teaching situation and is later asked to identify the words in isolation. The subjects successes and errors are recorded until he reaches the expected criterion. The words are then ranked according to their error scores.

In his study Coleman considered the effect word class might have on the learnability of words. He found that the word classes ranked from easiest to most difficult were: interjections, names, nouns, adjectives, conjunctions, pronouns, prepositions, adverbs, verbs, interrogatives, auxiliaries, and articles.

Chester (2) used Coleman's technique in studying the learnability of content and function words with high and low socioeconomic subject. He found no significant differences between the learnability of content and function words but he did find that high socioeconomic subjects learned the words faster than low socioeconomic subjects even though he controlled for I.Q.

This writer (Gustafson, 1974) (8) used Coleman's technique with a few modifications with the first 100 words of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Sight Word List compiled by Otto and Chester. (20) As mentioned previously, it was found that the frequency ratings of the words had little or no relation to their learnability rankings. Answers to two other questions besides the relationship of frequency and learnability were sought in the study, (1) In terms of difficulty of learning, what is the rank order of the first 100 words of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Sight Word List? and (2) Are the 100 most frequent words of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Sight Word List differentially difficult for males and females?

One hundred kindergarten boys and 100 kindergarten girls from 13 Northeastern Wisconsin classrooms served as subjects in this study. These subjects had had no formal reading instruction so that previous experience with reading was minimal. The subjects were matched on the basis of their scores on the Learning Rate Subtest of the Murphy-Durrell Reading Readiness Analysis. This test was used because it was very similar to the task, namely, "look-say" learning, that the subjects would meet later in the study. The "look-say" learning task seemed as appropriate as any which could be controlled even though the visual and

auditory modalities were stressed. Even if the modality patterns of every subject were known, ". . . there is still insufficient evidence to indicate whether teaching methods should emphasize the strongest or the weakest sensory modality of the learner (p. 38)." (2)

The subjects were stratified by sex and their Murphy-Durrell scores and randomly divided into 20 groups of five boys and five girls. The 100 words were printed on flashcards and assigned to 20 groups of five words and were controlled for initial letter and length so that each word in a group had a different beginning letter and each group had words of varying length. Then the 20 groups of words were randomly assigned to the 20 groups of subjects so that, in effect, each word was learned by ten subjects, five boys and five girls.

Initially, each of the five assigned words was presented to the child accompanied by an oral demonstration sentence which illustrated the most frequent usage of that word in the English language. An example of the initial presentation was: Many: This says many (experimenter shows the subject the flashcard), as in the sentence, "You have many friends." Can you read many? (subject response). Good! Would you read it once more? (subject response).

Then the next word was presented and the same procedure was used until all five words were presented. After the initial presentation and every presentation thereafter, the words were shuffled to insure random order of presentation. After the initial presentation of the words, each word was presented in isolation. If the subject could not pronounce the word within ten seconds, the initial presentation format

for that word was repeated. This procedure was repeated for all five words until the subject could identify all five words as a set without error or until he completed 20 trials with each word.

This study was an improvement over previous learnability studies since a word was not dropped from further consideration as soon as a subject identified it, but rather the set of five words was repeated until they were all identified in a single trial. This procedure seemed to have more relevance to "real" learning because a lucky guess did not affect the learnability score of a word.

Three rankings of the words according to learnability were obtained: (1) ranking by males (see List A); (2) ranking by females (see List B); and (3) ranking by males and females combined (see List C). Before discussing the rankings one caution must be noted: The reliability of these rankings is open to question since the sample size was small even though the subjects were carefully selected.

In List A the error scores for the males ranged from eight for the word which to 92 out of a possible 100 for the word other. In List B the error scores for the females ranged from five for the word to to 93 for the word now. For the combined groups List C shows that the error scores ranged from 16 out of a possible 200 for the word to to 183 for the word now.

There was no significant difference in the overall learning of males and females. It might be plausible that the effects of the American culture have their greatest impact only after a child has been placed in a structured reading program.

List A: Males

Rank	Word	Frequency Rank	No. of Errors
1	which	74	8
2	would	66	9
3.5	to	3	11
3.5	no	80	11
5.5	a	2	12
5.5	big	89	12
7	up	43	14
8	see	57	17
9	I	17	18
10	long	84	19
11	water	67	21
12.5	she	24	22
12.5	too	95	22
15	out	49	25
15	on	13	25
15	in	6	25
17	be	31	27
18	first	92	28
19	back	91	30
20.5	for	14	31
[illegible].5	can	32	31
[illegible]	so	58	32
23	there	34	32
23	little	68	32
25.5	or	48	33
25.5	will	42	33
27	you	7	34
28	down	78	36
29	people	72	38
31	two	69	39
31	by	55	39
31	go	81	39
33.5	is	8	40
33.5	we	45	40
35	use	98	41
36	when	36	44
38	this	27	45
38	than	96	45
38	it	10	45
41	if	59	46
41	said	20	46
41	of	5	46
44	an	73	47
44	time	76	47
44	are	15	47
46.5	one	26	48
46.5	these	60	48
48.5	just	88	49
48.5	had	25	49
51	not	35	50
51	make	61	50
51	has	70	50
53	day	99	51
54.5	each	41	55
54.5	over	94	55
56.5	write	52	56
56.5	look	86	56
58.5	like	56	57
58.5	did	71	57
60	how	37	59
61	but	33	60
63	some	50	61
63	your	39	61
63	all	28	61
65	was	12	62
66	his	19	64
67	find	85	65
68	as	22	66
69	way	93	67
71	good	97	68
71	him	63	68
71	do	40	68
73.5	get	82	69
73.5	made	87	69
76	into	62	71
76	that	11	71
76	her	47	71
79	then	46	72
79	with	18	72
79	my	79	72
81	more	77	74
83	many	44	76
83	he	9	76
83	at	21	76
85	where	100	77
87	about	54	78
87	from	30	78
87	have	23	78
89	them	51	79
90	could	75	80
91	very	90	81
92	and	4	82
93	they	16	85
94	what	25	87
95	the	1	88
96	their	53	89
97.5	now	83	90
97.5	were	38	90
99	word	65	91
100	other	64	92

List B: Females

Rank	Word	Frequency Rank	No. of Errors	Rank	Word	Frequency Rank	No. of Errors
1	to	3	5	51	do	40	48
2	water	67	6	52	can	32	49
3.5	a	2	7	53	of	5	49
3.5	big	89	7	54	just	88	51
5	which	74	12	55	at	21	52
6	too	95	15	56	him	63	54
7	two	69	16	58	had	29	55
8	first	92	18	58	not	35	55
10.5	I	17	20	58	your	39	55
10.5	in	6	20	60	or	48	56
10.5	little	68	20	62	was	12	57
10.5	day	99	20	62	the	1	57
13	people	72	22	62	all	28	57
14	be	31	23	64	we	45	58
15.5	one	26	24	66	get	82	59
15.5	are	15	24	66	that	11	59
17	will	42	27	66	have	23	59
18	is	8	28	68.5	my	79	60
20.5	see	57	29	68.5	over	94	60
20.5	she	24	29	71	their	53	61
20.5	would	66	29	71	each	41	61
20.5	up	43	29	71	there	34	61
23.5	out	49	30	73.5	what	25	62
23.5	for	14	30	73.5	did	71	62
27	no	80	32	75	these	60	63
27	he	9	32	78.5	into	62	64
27	go	81	32	78.5	then	46	64
27	like	56	32	78.5	were	38	64
27	make	61	32	78.5	on	13	64
30	write	52	33	78.5	use	98	64
31	if	59	34	78.5	them	51	64
32	look	86	37	82	how	37	66
34	down	78	38	83	some	50	67
34	time	76	38	84	other	64	69
34	you	7	38	86	her	47	70
36	so	58	39	86	very	90	70
38	good	97	41	86	has	70	70
38	way	93	41	88	they	16	71
38	long	84	41	89	find	85	72
40	by	55	42	91	more	77	75
42	word	65	44	91	with	18	75
42	but	33	44	91	from	30	75
42	it	10	44	93	could	75	78
45	back	91	46	94	his	19	79
45	and	4	46	95	this	27	80
45	an	73	46	96	than	96	83
48.5	many	44	47	97	where	100	84
48.5	made	87	47	98	as	22	86
48.5	said	20	47	99	about	54	87
48.5	when	36	47	100	now	83	93

List C: All Data

Rank	Word	Frequency Rank	No. of Errors	Rank	Word	Frequency Rank	No. of Errors
1	to	3	16	51	had	29	104
2	big	89	19	52	not	35	105
3	a	2	19	53	use	98	105
4	which	74	20	54	way	93	108
5	water	67	27	55	he	9	108
6	too	95	37	56	good	97	109
7	would	66	38	57	these	60	111
8	I	17	38	58	over	94	115
9	up	43	43	59	each	41	116
10	no	80	43	60	your	39	116
11	in	6	45	61	made	87	116
12	see	57	46	62	do	40	116
13	first	92	46	63	all	28	118
14	be	31	50	64	was	12	119
15	she	24	51	65	did	71	119
16	little	68	52	66	has	70	120
17	two	69	55	67	him	63	122
18	out	49	55	68	many	44	123
19	long	84	60	69	this	27	125
20	will	42	60	70	how	37	125
21	people	72	60	71	get	82	128
22	for	14	61	72	some	50	128
23	is	8	68	73	and	4	128
24	so	58	71	74	at	21	128
25	go	81	71	75	than	96	128
26	day	99	71	76	that	11	130
27	are	15	71	77	my	79	132
28	one	26	72	78	into	62	135
29	you	7	72	79	word	65	135
30	down	78	74	80	then	46	136
31	back	91	76	81	have	23	137
32	if	59	80	82	find	85	137
33	can	32	80	83	her	47	141
34	by	55	81	84	his	19	143
35	make	61	82	85	them	51	143
36	time	76	85	86	the	1	145
37	on	13	89	87	with	18	147
38	write	52	89	88	what	25	149
39	like	56	89	89	more	77	149
40	or	48	89	90	their	53	150
41	it	10	89	91	very	90	151
42	when	36	91	92	as	22	152
43	there	34	93	93	from	30	153
44	look	86	93	94	were	38	154
45	said	20	93	95	they	16	156
46	an	73	93	96	could	75	158
47	of	5	95	97	where	100	161
48	we	45	98	98	other	64	161
49	just	88	100	99	about	54	165
50	but	33	104	100	now	83	183

One interesting finding in this study was the wide variances in ranks of some of the words on the male and female lists. For example, the word on was ranked 15th in difficulty on the table for males while it it was ranked 78.5 on the table for females, a difference of 63.5 ranks. The following words showed differences of 42.5 to 58 ranks between the sexes: than (58), this (57), word (57), he (56), there (48), and (47), use (43.5), and day (42.5). Even after one allows for the variance due to the small sample size, it seems plausible that some words were easier for males than for females and vice versa. Further research with larger sample sizes is needed.

At this point, if any of the three lists are to be used by classroom teachers, the combined list seems to have the most to offer since it is based on the total scores of both sexes and not influenced as much as the separate lists by deviant scores.

Implications for Teachers

Sight word lists seem to have a place in many reading programs since they do offer guidance concerning the vocabulary beginning readers will meet in their early attempts at reading. Which word list to use is a personal matter and doesn't seem to be of any great importance at the lower levels since the very basic words seem to be included in most of the lists.

The order in which sight words should be taught seems to be an unanswered question at this point since it would seem that all of the methods of ranking words can be questioned.

The subject concerning how to teach sight words hasn't been discussed in this paper. This is because the writer believes that each teacher should use the methods which work best for her, whether it be a language experience approach or whatever.

A study dealing with visual memory by Mason and Woodcock seems to have implications for teaching sight words. They concluded, ". . . that children beginning first grade are apt to recognize falsely many combinations of letters which, in a specific order, comprise a printed word to which they have been exposed. They are more apt to generalize upon the basis of first letter than upon the basis of general contour or configuration.

The implication of this conclusion is that programs for instruction in beginning reading should direct the attention of the learner to the ordering of letters other than the first whenever they present a new word which has the same first letter as one already taught. Their authors would be well advised to delete those exercises in which children are directed to draw contour boxes around printed words and those in which children match words to black boxes of the same general configuration (pp. 868-9)." (18)

Another implication for teachers results from the study conducted by Johnson et. al. concerning which words first and second graders knew on Johnson's word list. Their results suggested that a child's reading vocabulary development is influenced by factors other than basal readers and so on. As a result they believe printed materials other than basals should be part of a beginning reading program since it seems many children are quickly ready to move beyond basals. (15)

In closing, it might be said that a sight vocabulary is a tool and how it is used determines its value.

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